Climate Change and Geopolitics in the Blue Pacific

By Danielle Lynn Goh

SYNOPSIS

Climate change has consistently been articulated as the greatest threat to the region by the leaders of Pacific Island countries. Atoll nations face the possibility of forced displacement due to rising sea levels and extreme weather events. At the same time, these countries risk being drawn into the China-US competition for geopolitical influence even though this rivalry provides opportunities for them to engage with the big powers to deal with climate change. The Pacific island countries have also been strengthening their regional security through a more unified approach, established in their 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy.

COMMENTARY

On 9 November 2021, Tuvalu's foreign minister Simon Kofe addressed the United Nations Climate Change Conference, more commonly referred to as COP26, standing knee-deep in seawater. This was a dramatic reminder that sea-level rise and the increases in natural disasters are existential threats to the Pacific Islands, with atoll nations like Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands on the frontlines of climate change.

At the UN General Assembly on 21 September 2023, the presidents of Kiribati, Micronesia and Nauru sounded the alarm on the devastating impacts of climate change on their homelands and called upon major emitters of greenhouse gases to commit to the reduction of emissions by 2030.

Besides climate change, geopolitics has also placed the region in the spotlight. China has been expanding its influence in the Pacific Islands and has made significant inroads particularly with the Solomon Islands. In 2019, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare switched diplomatic ties from Taiwan to Beijing.

In April 2022, Sogavare [signed](#) a bilateral security cooperation agreement with China, which focused on boosting the Solomon Islands' national security capacity, and cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster response, amongst others. This development ramped up the competition for geopolitical influence between China and the US in the southern Pacific.

On 22 May 2023, the US signed a defence cooperation pact with Papua New Guinea (PNG). It also [pledged](#) more aid to the region, committing about US$200m for infrastructure development. In July 2023, China and the Solomon Islands signed another [deal](#), this time a controversial pact on police cooperation.

Climate Change and Geopolitics Intertwined

The geopolitical competition between the US and China poses challenges for other states, as they risk being dragged into their respective orbits. At the same time, it can also present opportunities for the region to engage with both powers on climate issues.

While China has strategic and economic interests in the region, what is lesser known are its efforts to help Pacific Island countries to tackle the effects of climate change. There is speculation that frustrations with the West over a perceived lack of attention to fulfilling climate goals, may have led these countries to look increasingly to China for support in tackling the climate crisis.

In April 2022, China [launched](#) a climate-change cooperation centre with Pacific Island countries. This centre, which is located in Liaocheng City, Shandong Province, will also work with Pacific Island universities to build climate infrastructure such as a climate change simulation laboratory, and a climate disaster monitoring and early warning joint laboratory.

Similarly, the US has stepped up its climate efforts in the Pacific. In September 2022, the Biden administration unveiled its first-ever Pacific Partnership Strategy, which includes climate change as one of its nine pillars, and [pledged](#) an additional US$130 million in new investments to support climate programmes.

The above-mentioned security agreement between PNG and the US is an overarching one that includes programmes on climate change adaptation and protection of vulnerable fisheries. These programmes seem to target Chinese companies engaged in fishing, logging and mining activities that damage the environment.

China's Rising Influence

Although China has expanded its influence in the Pacific Islands, it is unlikely to pose a security threat to the region. Beyond great power rivalry, the threats to regional stability are domestic in nature, such as the civil unrest, corruption, poverty and weak governance that the Solomon Islands is still struggling with.

Furthermore, China's policy towards the South Pacific is largely driven by economic considerations. Ten of the 16 members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) have signed up for China's Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese businesses have also been investing in enterprises overseas, including in fisheries, forestry and mining in the Pacific

Islands. There has been an increase in trade between China and Solomon Islands over the past two decades.

While China has succeeded in signing a security agreement with the Solomon Islands, it encountered a serious setback in 2022 when it failed to reach consensus with 10 Pacific Island countries on a sweeping trade and security deal over concerns that it would threaten regional stability.

The "Blue Pacific" Family

Amid increased concerns over climate change, regional security, and the rise of geopolitical competition in the region, the leaders of the Pacific Island countries have established a framework to address these challenges collectively. The term "Blue Pacific" was first raised in the PIF leaders meeting in 2017, a concept which emphasised their shared norms, and unity arising from their geography, culture, and challenges.

This unified approach to tackle the region's security and climate change issues forms an important bulwark against excessive influence by the external powers. The region's 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy outlines the key areas of cooperation besides asserting that, as a "Blue Pacific Continent", the Pacific Island nations would engage with partners from a "position of strength, unity and solidarity".

While still in its nascent stages of development, the "Blue Pacific" framework is seen as a step in the right direction in efforts to increase regional stability and cooperation. Pacific Island countries have also adopted the "Pacific Way", which includes consensus-based decision making, respect for sovereignty and non-interference.

On the international stage, Pacific Island nations have effectively asserted their collective interests – they successfully lobbied for an Ocean Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to form part of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and are active in UN negotiations for a new management arrangement for the high seas and the governance of seabed mining in international waters.

Placing Climate Change at the Top of the Agenda

For Pacific Island countries, climate change remains the greatest threat to the region. To address this, they should continue to build on their shared norms as the "Blue Pacific", focus on strengthening cooperation on climate adaptation, development of disaster early warning systems, and push for climate action on the international stage. They should also avoid being drawn into taking sides in the US-China competition, while tapping into the potential for growth in cooperating with other multilateral organisations like ASEAN.

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